

What My Bike Has Taught Me About White Privilege

By Jeremy Dowsett

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The phrase “white privilege” is one that rubs a lot of white people the wrong way. It can trigger something in them that shuts down conversation or at least makes them very defensive. (Especially those who grew up relatively less privileged than other folks around them). And I’ve seen more than once where this happens and the next move in the conversation is for the person who brought up white privilege to say, “The reason you’re getting defensive is because you’re feeling the discomfort of having your privilege exposed.”

I’m sure that’s true sometimes. And I’m sure there are a lot of people, white and otherwise, who can attest to a kind of a-ha moment or paradigm shift where they “got” what privilege means and they did realize they had been getting defensive because they were uncomfortable at having their privilege exposed. But I would guess that more often than not, the frustration and the shutting down is about something else. It comes from the fact that nobody wants to be a racist. And the move “you only think that because you’re looking at this from the perspective of privilege” or the more terse and confrontational “check your privilege!” kind of sound like an accusation that someone is a racist (if they don’t already understand privilege). And the phrase “white privilege” kind of sounds like, “You are a racist and there’s nothing you can do about it because you were born that way.”

And if this were what “white privilege” meant—which it is not— defensiveness and frustration would be the appropriate response. But privilege talk is not intended to make a moral assessment or a moral claim about the privileged at all. It is about systemic imbalance. It is about injustices that have arisen because of the history of racism that birthed the way things are now. It’s not saying, “You’re a bad person because you’re white.” It’s saying, “The system is skewed in ways that you maybe haven’t realized or had to think about precisely because it’s skewed in YOUR favor.”

I am white. So I have not experienced racial privilege from the “under” side firsthand. But my children (and a lot of other people I love) are not white. And so I care about privilege and what it means for racial justice in our country. And one experience I have had firsthand, which has helped me to understand privilege and listen to privilege talk without feeling defensive, is riding my bike.

Now, I know, it sounds a little goofy at first. But stick with me. Because I think that this analogy might help some white people understand privilege talk without feeling like they’re having their character attacked.

About five years ago I decide to start riding my bike as my primary mode of transportation. As in, on the street, in traffic. Which is enjoyable for a number of

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reasons (exercise, wind in yer face, the cool feeling of going fast, etc.) But the thing is, I don't live in Portland or Minneapolis. I live in the capital city of the epicenter of the auto industry: Lansing, MI. This is not, by any stretch, a bike-friendly town. And often, it is down-right dangerous to be a bike commuter here.

Now sometimes its dangerous for me because people in cars are just blatantly a**holes to me. If I am in the road—where I legally belong—people will yell at me to get on the sidewalk. If I am on the sidewalk—which is sometimes the safest place to be—people will yell at me to get on the road. People in cars think its funny to roll down their window and yell something right when they get beside me. Or to splash me on purpose. People I have never met are angry at me for just being on a bike in “their” road and they let me know with colorful language and other acts of aggression.

I can imagine that for people of color life in a white-majority context feels a bit like being on a bicycle in midst of traffic. They have the right to be on the road, and laws on the books to make it equitable, but that doesn't change the fact that they are on a bike in a world made for cars. Experiencing this when I'm on my bike in traffic has helped me to understand what privilege talk is really about.

Now most people in cars are not intentionally aggressive toward me. But even if all the jerks had their licenses revoked tomorrow, the road would still be a dangerous place for me. Because the whole transportation infrastructure privileges the automobile. It is born out of a history rooted in the auto industry that took for granted that everyone should use a car as their mode of transportation. It was not built to be convenient or economical or safe for me.

And so people in cars—nice, non-aggressive people—put me in danger all the time because they see the road from the privileged perspective of a car. E.g., I ride on the right side of the right lane. Some people fail to change lanes to pass me (as they would for another car) or even give me a wide berth. Some people fly by just inches from me not realizing how scary/dangerous that is for me (like if I were to swerve to miss some roadkill just as they pass). These folks aren't aggressive or hostile toward me, but they don't realize that a pothole or a build up of gravel or a broken bottle, which they haven't given me enough room to avoid—because in a car they don't need to be aware of these things—could send me flying from my bike or cost me a bent rim or a flat tire.

So the semi driver who rushes past throwing gravel in my face in his hot wake isn't necessarily a bad guy. He could be sitting in his cab listening to Christian radio and thinking about nice things he can do for his wife. But the fact that “the

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system” allows him to do those things instead of being mindful of me is a privilege he has that I don’t. (I have to be hyper-aware of him).

This is what privilege is about. Like drivers, nice, non-aggressive white people can move in the world without thinking about the “potholes” or the “gravel” that people of color have to navigate, or how things that they do—not intending to hurt or endanger anyone—might actually be making life more difficult or more dangerous for a person of color.

Nice, non-aggressive drivers that don’t do anything at all to endanger me are still privileged to pull out of their driveway each morning and know that there are roads that go all the way to their destination. They don’t have to wonder if there are bike lanes and what route they will take to stay safe. In the winter, they can be certain that the snow will be plowed out of their lane into my lane and not the other way around.

And it’s not just the fact that the whole transportation infrastructure is built around the car. It’s the law, which is poorly enforced when cyclists are hit by cars, the fact that gas is subsidized by the government and bike tires aren’t, and just the general mindset of a culture that is in love with cars after a hundred years of propaganda and still thinks that bikes are toys for kids and triathletes.

So when I say the semi driver is privileged, it isn’t a way of calling him a bad person or a man-slayer or saying he didn’t really earn his truck, but just way of acknowledging all that—infrastructure, laws, gov’t, culture—and the fact that if he and I get in a collision, I will probably die and he will just have to clean the blood off of his bumper. In the same way, talking about *racial* privilege isn’t a way of telling white people they are bad people or racists or that they didn’t really earn what they have.

It’s a way of trying to make visible the fact that system is not neutral, it is not a level-playing field, it’s not the same experience for everyone. There are biases and imbalances and injustices built into the warp and woof of our culture. (The recent events in Ferguson, MO should be evidence enough of this—more thoughts on that here). Not because you personally are a racist, but because the system has a history and was built around this category “race” and that’s not going to go away overnight (or even in 100 years). To go back to my analogy: Bike lanes are relatively new, and still just kind of an appendage on a system that is inherently car-centric. So—white readers—the next time someone drops the p-word, try to remember they aren’t calling you a racist or saying you didn’t really earn your college degree,

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they just want you to try empathize with how scary it is to be on a bike sometimes (metaphorically speaking).

One last thing: Now, I know what it is like to be a white person engaged in racial reconciliation or justice work and to feel like privilege language is being used to silence you or to feel frustrated that you are genuinely trying to be a part of the solution not the problem but every time you open your mouth someone says, “Check your privilege.” (I.e., even though privilege language doesn’t mean “You are one of the bad guys,” some people do use it that way). So if you’ll permit me to get a few more miles out of this bike analogy (ya see what I did there?), I think it can help encourage white folks who have felt that frustration to stay engaged and stay humble.

I have a lot of “conversations” with drivers. Now, rationally, I know that most drivers are not jerks. But I have a long and consistent history of bad experiences with drivers and so, when I’ve already been honked at or yelled at that day, or when I’ve read a blog post about a fellow cyclist who’s been mowed down by a careless driver, it’s hard for me to stay civil.

But when I’m not so civil with a “privileged” driver, it’s not because I hate him/her, or think s/he is evil. It’s because it’s the third time that day I got some gravel in the face. So try to remember that even if you don’t feel like a “semi driver,” a person of color might be experiencing you the way a person on a bike experiences being passed by a semi. Even if you’re listening to Christian radio.

My Bike and White Privilege Revisited

A few weeks ago, I posted this about white privilege— explaining how riding a bike for transportation has helped me to understand it more. And it has gotten quite the response. Way more hits than anything else on the blog. Reblogged all over the place. Almost 1,000 comments so far. Obviously, white privilege is something people want to talk about.

A lot of people said it was helpful, but lots of other people told me it was dumb or terrible or racist. So I’d like to respond to a couple of the arguments and critiques that I see as themes in the comments.

First, a lot of people pointed out that the analogy fails at the point where I choose to get off my bike. This is a really valid point to make. The experience I have as a cyclist—the disproportionate sense of power, the inequality of our road system, the fear of getting squashed—those all disappear for me when I get off my bike.

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For people of color, however, there's no getting off the bike. I didn't say that explicitly in the original post. But I understood that when I wrote it. So I really want to validate that that IS important to remember.

But I also don't think it damages the usefulness of this analogy. The analogy still works at lots of other salient points. If you read through the comments, you can see where people made lots of smart connections and extensions of the analogy. (Warning: you will have to wade through a lot of dumb comments, I was pretty hands-off with the moderating).

Second, a couple of people were offended because they felt like the comparison was belittling. I just want to make clear: I was in no way saying that my experience as a cyclist is EQUIVALENT TO what people of color experience in terms of the level of inequality or the amount of struggle that it creates in my life. It was meant as an analogy, not a direct comparison.

The point was that having an experience where I am a) a minority, with b) significantly less power, who is c) trying to operate in a system that is designed around the majority—an experience that I don't have very frequently as a white man— has helped me to empathize with folks who have those kinds of experiences in life for other reasons. I shared my experience because I know that other white people have trouble listening to privilege talk and analogy is a way of coming at it sideways and hopefully building some empathy.

In addition to those two critiques of the analogy, there were lots of other commenters pointing out other ways they thought the analogy broke down (or just unsubstantiated complaints that it was a bad analogy). To all of those folks, I guess I would just say, that is the nature of analogies. They show likenesses between two unlike things in a way that helps us understand one of them better. The two things being compared are necessarily not EXACTLY the same, otherwise there would be no point in comparing them. And on some level, this how all language works. We connect abstract ideas to concrete pictures so that we can better grasp their meaning. See, I just said "works." Language doesn't really work, but the concrete image of a person or a machine working helped you get what I meant. (Ah, I just did it again, "see" and "get" are not what's actually happening when...You get the picture...Oh!) One commenter, **Colubris**, in response to someone who didn't seem to get this, said all this much more succinctly (and sarcastically): Yeah, metaphors can be hard. Keep working at it.

In short, if you didn't like the post just because you were able to find some point where the analogy breaks down, your beef is with language, not with me.

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Thankfully, I had lots of people tell me that it did help them get white privilege for the first time, so, whatever its weaknesses, I think it works. In fact, I had folks say the analogy was “perfect,” that it was the “best analogy they’ve ever heard,” and that it “moved them to tears.” So, I think we can still trust the power of language, specifically metaphor, to convey meaning. Some white people said, “OK, I get it. Now what do I do?” My friend Noah wrote a good what-now? piece here (in which he cries a lot about me copying him).

Third, a lot of white folks said that the problem with my post was that it just whined about my experience as a biker and didn’t make specific connections to analogous experiences people of color face. E.g. **John Klapproth** of Anchorage, AK, who read the article over at Quartz wrote in:
You do not define, in any way, what white privilege is, nor do you give any concrete examples of white privilege. You make a nice comparison to bike riding but you don’t tell me what it is you’re comparing the bike riding to.

This is a valid critique of my post as an argument for the existence of white privilege. But my post is not an argument for the existence of white privilege. It is an attempt to help people hear the language without automatically getting defensive. A thought experiment to help create empathy in folks who might otherwise have trouble empathizing. It was a way of helping white people (other cyclists at least) to be open to the idea that in the same way they know they experience something on the road that drivers don’t see—because of their vantage point— people of color experience something in life that white folks have trouble seeing because of our vantage point.

To draw out all of the specific connections between cycling under-privilege and racial under-privilege would be to put me in the place of speaking for people of color, which I tried not to do. I let people speak from their own experiences in the comments. Some folks pointed out some more subtle things like media (mis)representation of black people or studies that show that non-white-sounding names on job applications are less likely to be called for an interview, but one commenter went right for the jugular:

The white privilege of not having your murder justified by showing “thug” pictures, pointing to marijuana use... and militarizing against peaceful protests in the name of said victim.

Fourth, a lot of people accused me of being racist for simply using the term “white” or bringing up racial categories at all. I can understand why some white people think the color-blind route is the way to go. But here’s the thing: most people of color are saying it’s not, so maybe we should listen to them. This is

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complicated, because “race”—as we’ve come to understand it in the US—is most definitely a socially- constructed thing. As a Christian, I am definitely a non-essentialist, i.e., I believe we are really all a part of the human race. And as someone in a “mixed-race” family, the socially- constructed nature of race is transparent to me. Within the confines of my home, “race” disappears. My kids don’t see me as a white dad, they just see me as dad. I don’t see them as my black kids, I just see them as my kids. As in, we literally forget about race. But we don’t live within the confines of our home. We have to go out into the world, where people say dumb things like, “What country were your kids adopted from?”, where I have to worry about how they might be treated and how it’s impacting their self-understanding, where, as one of them is about to be a teenager, I have to worry if he might get arrested for wearing a hoody, or worse, get shot.

So the fact that race is fictional—or as Henry Louis Gates says, race is a trope—doesn’t mean that just invoking the human race will make all the injustices it has caused or perpetuated go away. We have to acknowledge it still matters if we’re going to work toward a future where it matters less. Lastly, a lot of drivers argued that I was just wrong about my experience as a cyclist, or made some kind of comment about all cyclists being jerks or drivers being justified in thinking all cyclists were, because most of them are. Like **Mike S.:**

....sometimes [drivers] are just frustrated that many bikers act like superior jerks who own the whole road and put multiple people at risk with bad behavior.

Ironically, even though these folks completely missed the point of the article, they accidentally proved it. Drivers who think that cyclists aren’t facing significantly more risk on the road, or that we don’t have to do more work to get to the same place, or that the transportation infrastructure isn’t made for cars with bikes as a mere afterthought, can only be speaking from a lack of experience of riding a bike for transportation. Thus, they demonstrate the point about white privilege—you don’t see it because the system is designed for you. (I’m really, really tempted to say they need to check their privilege here...but I won’t).